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**‘Getting qualified in woodwork’: Young people’s reasons for choosing VET programmes  
in the UK**

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**Correspondence**

*Dr Liz Atkins*

*Federation University Australia*

*School of Education and Arts*

*Mount Helen*

*Victoria*

*3350*

*[l.atkins@federation.edu.au](mailto:l.atkins@federation.edu.au)*

## ‘Getting qualified in woodwork’: Young people’s reasons for choosing VET programmes in the UK

### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a qualitative study carried out in the UK during summer 2010 on behalf of City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD). The study formed part of a wider, international project which aimed to explore young people’s perceptions of vocational education and training (VET), and as such is of significance in the Australian context: it also formed part of the evidence for the influential Wolf Review of Vocational Education which reported to the UK government in 2011. The study found that serendipity, contingent events and influence of significant others are most influential in choice of vocational programme and that young peoples’ understandings of possible career paths vary in sophistication, differentiated by age, programme level and subject area. Perceived attractiveness of VET was closely associated with societal perception of their courses (which the young people considered to be negative) suggesting that, in the UK, pre-Coalition policy (before May 2010) has been unsuccessful in addressing issues of parity of esteem, despite considerable policy investment in the VET sector.

The paper explores the implications of these findings for the ‘English model’ of Vocational Education in the context of current Coalition policy. It concludes that whilst some recent policy initiatives, such as the proposed introduction of University Technical Colleges may be successful in raising the esteem of some forms of specialised VET, broad vocational courses at lower levels will continue to be held in lower esteem and to confer little educational advantage on those young people, largely drawn from working class backgrounds and displaying multiple exclusionary characteristics, who pursue them.

**Key words:** Vocational Education; VET; Aspiration; Careers; Marginalisation; Social Class

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the findings of a qualitative study carried out in summer 2010 on behalf of City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD), which explored young people’s perceptions of vocational education (see Atkins et al 2011). This paper focuses on aspects of three of the key findings of the study with particular reference to those young people on programmes at the lowest levels (levels 1 and 2 post-16). Many young people at

this level, particularly those on level 1 programmes, have diagnoses of special educational need, and many have moved in and out of various forms of participation in education and employment, interspersed with periods of unemployment. The issues raised by the study are discussed in the context of contemporary Coalition policy in respect of vocational education, and the likely impact of that policy on the lives and experiences of young people such as those who participated in this study.

The first of these key issues, which was not unexpected in the context of earlier research on transitions (Hodkinson et al (1996) Colley et al (2003) and Atkins (2009), was that serendipity played a more significant role than Careers Education and Guidance (CEG) in the choice of vocational programme, as did the influence of friends and family and contingent events. Related to this however, it was apparent that young people's understandings of possible career paths vary in sophistication not only differentiated by age group but also by level of programme and subject area. Broadly speaking, those young people on higher level programmes (level 3) gave more sophisticated responses than those on lower level programmes (level 2 and below), and those young people in the older age group more sophisticated responses than those in the 14-16 age group. Of perhaps greater interest was the fact that this difference was also apparent between programme types at the same level. Thus, young people on more 'academic' broad vocational programmes such as Business, gave more sophisticated and insightful responses than those on practical programmes such as Beauty Therapy or Childcare, even where this was at the same notional level in the context of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). These differences were particularly apparent in terms of the young peoples' understandings of possible career paths and also extended to their career aspirations. Particularly at the lowest levels, it was apparent that the lack of understanding formed a further constraint on the young people in addition to those imposed by structures such social class and education, thus limiting their potential for agency in the context of the local and global worlds in which the young people lived their lives.

Thirdly, it was also apparent that the young people placed significant value on their programmes having (an often mistaken) belief that vocational programmes would confer (unspecified) skills absent in young people taking an 'academic' route and thus give the vocationally qualified an advantage in the labour market. Dissonant with this, the young people recognised that societal perception of vocational education is broadly negative, and were specific in identifying a societal perception that vocational education is for 'thick' people. These perceptions seem to suggest that not only has pre-Coalition policy has been unsuccessful in addressing issues of parity of esteem but that the Coalition faces

an uphill, and possibly impossible battle to gain broader societal acceptance of the 'immense value' (DfE, 2011: 1) of forms of vocational education which have become progressively more impoverished through the ceaseless reforms of the past 35 years.

## **Methodology**

This primarily qualitative study adopted a mixed methods approach. As it formed part of a broader, international study, the methodology was designed to facilitate application across different international contexts. Data were gathered from two schools and two colleges, involving young people in two age groups: 14-16 and 18-20. All the participants were undertaking vocational programmes: these included both broad vocational courses such as BTECs in Business or Media and occupational awards (NVQs) in areas such as Beauty Therapy and Engineering. The institutions were geographically spread across England and encompassed urban, inner-city and rural locations thus allowing comparison between different social and cultural contexts. Initially, three data gathering methods were utilised. These were online questionnaires, made available via institution intra-nets, as well as focus groups and individual interviews at each site. Unfortunately, insufficient data was gathered from the questionnaires to facilitate a meaningful analysis, so these data were discarded. The focus groups and interviews were subject to both SPSS analysis and thematic qualitative analysis. The analysis was conducted within the context of a Bourdieusian theoretical framework drawing on notions of structure and agency, field and habitus as well as on the extensive body of literature exploring vocational education and school to work transitions for young people. Participation was voluntary, and parental consent obtained for young people under the age of 18. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Ethics committee.

## **Serendipity and Contingent Events**

Government education policy in recent years has persisted in utilising models based on the concept of rational, 'ladder-like' trajectories, despite it being nearly two decades since Hodgkinson (1996, pp.132, 133) utilising an earlier analysis by Strauss (1962) rejected this notion, proposing instead the theory of 'careership' which sees development as transformation, based on turning points. However, whilst these concepts effectively encapsulate the messy nature of many career trajectories, notions of careership and transformation also tend to imply positive forms of development. It is apparent from data generated by this study that within a context of global economic crisis and mass youth unemployment, young people with the poorest post-16 educational outcomes experience turning points which are often wholly negative and which are heavily reflective of the

random nature of chance, serendipity and the limited possibilities of the various forms of low level (non) participation open to them. Within this framework, the young person moves between various forms of low level participation and in and out of unemployment (Thompson and Simmons, 2011:175) as they make uneasy and fractured transitions to work and adulthood (Macdonald and Marsh, 2005:32). This was exemplified by Richard's experience. He was undertaking a level 2 IT course at college, and had only enrolled on his vocational programme because he was approached by a lecturer at an enrolment session he had taken his sister to. As he explained, he had not thought that college was a possibility for someone his age (he was 21), reporting that: *'I lost my job at Woolworths [after it was taken into receivership] and was just looking at getting another one but I don't have any qualifications...I'm 21. I thought college was for 16-19 year olds...I didn't know this place was here. It wasn't until my sister enrolled that when I brought her down I looked at the prospectus and saw courses I could do so I ended up having an interview and enrolled [on the same day]'*. Richard's experience reflects not only the turning point of redundancy from his job at Woolworths, but the serendipitous processes which lead many young people to undertake Further Education (FE) programmes at lower levels (Atkins, 2009: 146). Richard's enrolment on his IT programme would never have happened had he not taken his sister to enrol on a floristry programme and had an IT tutor not happened to be on hand to give advice. He might equally easily, given a different concatenation of events, been sent on an employability course, met a tutor in business or public services or remained unemployed until another low pay, low skill opportunity presented itself. Participating in education had also raised his aspirations although he remained uninformed about the level of credential necessary to access different forms of employment. Following completion of his programme, he hoped to find employment as an IT technician or to progress to a level 3 programme. He believed (incorrectly) that this would qualify him to work as a forensic IT analyst for the police.

The policy notion of unbroken, linear trajectories is also refuted by the impact of disillusionment with programmes. Steven, a level 2 IT student who described himself as finding 'maths and stuff' difficult, had joined his course because *'I didn't want to stay at school because I hated school, this was the only place I could come'* echoing the comments of students from an earlier study (Atkins, 2009:99). Stephen's comments also highlight the broader lack of opportunities available to young people with low levels of attainment. Where students did express a degree of disillusionment the most common reason for this was that their programme was less practical than they anticipated, although some students also expressed resentment at having to 'do English and maths' and

others, like Nicky and Natalie, were vague about their reasons for becoming disillusioned with a programme but had decided to 'progress' to a different area.

Natalie had completed a Level 1 Beauty programme, despite the fact that it had not met her expectations. Discussing her course and her future, she reported that 'I was offered a place to be a nurse (Health and Social Care) but I turned it down to do Beauty: I might do business next ... I hate beauty' Similarly, Nicky, who was on a level 2 art programme which she had joined with friends, planned to move to leisure and tourism because '*I don't want to do art any more....I want to work on the cruises and stuff*'.

Exploring this, Becka (Level 2 Beauty Therapy) believed people enrolled on vocational programmes because they perceived them to be 'easy' and left after discovering this was not the case. Another factor in these withdrawals may be what Ball et al (2001:135) describe as 'exhausted learner identity' perhaps reinforced by a recognition of the likely length of transition to achieve their aspirations (a minimum of three and up to five years to meet salon requirements for Beauty Therapy) leading to forms of self-elimination by the most disadvantaged (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:154) from an educational system designed to 'reproduce the structure of relations of domination and dependence' (Bourdieu, 1990:130).

In addition to refuting notions of rational career making and linear trajectories, these stories also imply that those young people on the vocational programmes at the lowest levels are likely to have messier and more broken trajectories, with more frequent 'turning points' and, ironically perhaps, given the range of programmes pursued by some of the young people in this study, fewer opportunities. That they have fewer opportunities might be ascribed to the influence of both field and habitus in the context of the social and cultural conditions in which the young people live, and the influence of those conditions on their Horizons for Action (Hodkinson et al 1996) in the context of a system in which 'learner dispositions and identity articulate with the ongoing (re)production of labour power' (Avis, 2007:176). That they have lives characterised by more frequent turning points has significant implications for the formation of identity and often involves re-appraisal of decisions and choices about life and career (Colley et al 2003; Ball et al 2000:119) as the young person 'struggles to make the world a different place' (Reay, 2004: 437).

Although Bourdieu and Wacquant refuted the argument that habitus is a fate arguing instead that it is an 'open system of dispositions' which is 'durable but not eternal'

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:133), and Bourdieu talks of the possibility of 'transforming the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1980c/ 1993a:87), the notion of struggling to make the world a different place suggests that this is not necessarily a possibility for everyone. For those young people who are most constrained by social class, economic conditions and low educational achievement the potential for agency is severely limited, and where even apparently modest ambitions may involve stretching cultural capital 'beyond its limits' (Ball et al 1999:212).

### **Un/sophisticated Career Notions and Aspirations**

The constraints associated with systemic and embodied structures of state, society and the education system, which restrict individual agency and serve to reproduce inequality (Avis, 2007, p. 167) were compounded for the students on lower level and more practical programmes by their limited understandings of career and possible future options, something which was, perhaps, also a reflection of their social class positioning.

Constrained by gender as well as class, but with high hopes for their future, many of these young people had post-fordist perceptions of the labour market which associated high pay, high skills work with their vocational qualifications. At lower levels their perceptions were also clearly associated with concepts of secure employment or 'jobs for life', describing class-specific 'opportunities' which also determined 'the level of occupational aspiration' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:184), but which were at best optimistic and at worst unrealistic in the context of contemporary high structural youth unemployment rates in England to which Wolf (2011:25) has drawn attention.

For example, Kate, a level 2 Childcare student wanted '*a good lifestyle so I don't struggle and enjoy what I do*'. Daniel, a fifteen year old school student and the only one in his group following a construction programme, considered that a career involved '*getting qualified in woodwork and having a secure job*', whilst Josh, a student from a different school, thought that a career was '*a job you do for a long term and earns a lot of money*'. Similarly, Zoey, age 16, on a level 2 Childcare and Education (CCE) programme considered that a career is '*something you want to do and get paid for*' whilst Becka, who had spent three years doing Beauty Therapy and was now approaching the end of the first year of a level 3 programme, stated that a career was '*choosing what you want to do and doing that job for the rest of your life*' emphasising the notion of a job for life. All anticipated remaining in the occupational areas associated with their vocational



programme, despite evidence to suggest that most, especially those at lower levels, will end up working in a different field (Wolf, 2011:37).

These perceptions were in sharp contrast to those of students on advanced programmes and those which might be described as more 'academic' than practical. For example Joe, a level 3 BTEC business student explained that career mean '*a long term commitment in a specialist area, and having the right skills and knowledge within that area, and progressing up the ladder*'. From this career he anticipated achieving '*financial [rewards] and being able to climb the business ladder, maybe into middle management and higher*'. A majority of his peers, all on the same programme, perceived graduate status to be essential to establishing a good career: Ali, a second year business student was typical of this, stating that having done the BTEC meant that he '*could go straight into jobs, but I'm looking forward to Uni and doing International Business*'. The aspirations of those young people on the lower level programmes, which conflate 'good qualifications' with 'good jobs' and 'good money' are consistent with those expressed by an earlier generation of young people on vocational programmes (Atkins, 2009:146) but are inconsistent with the outcomes of those programmes in terms of their limited or negative exchange value in the education and labour markets (Keep, 2009:40; Wolf, 2011:32) and reflect a buy in to government rhetoric about the value of vocational education which is in tension with the perception of the young people, discussed in the following section, that vocational qualifications are generally held in lower esteem than academic credentials, a perception expressed by young people from all settings, age-groups and type and level of programme.

Whilst the scope of this study did not encompass social class specifically it was apparent that the young people who participated represented a broad cross section of 'working class' youth and that most aspired to occupations which were both class and gender specific. As Bates (1993:73) and later Colley (2006) have argued, gendered and class fractional positionings play a critical role as young people 'learn to labour' through the medium of vocational education and training. The data from this study seem to imply that class fractional locations as well as embodied and gendered habitus are influencing aspirations, choice of vocational area and the young person's likelihood of succeeding in that area in terms of the way they are able to engage with the hidden curricula and social practices of learning (Colley, 2006:15) associated with it. Whilst tentative, and requiring further research, this argument suggests that those young people whose class fractional locations provide access to more limited cultural capital are less likely to engage with more 'academic' vocational programmes and more likely to engage with occupationally

related programmes where the workforce is class and gender specific such as construction, childcare and beauty therapy, and where opportunities for progression and development are severely limited. This contention would be consistent with Bourdieu's (1990:66) argument that whilst the global field in which these young people operate 'orients' their choices their *individual* choices are significantly influenced by individual habitus, motivation and values as well as with Hodkinson et al's (1996:140) argument that choices are made, and their horizons limited, in the context of a socially and culturally derived habitus. By extension, it also implies that those young people on more 'practical' occupationally related programmes such as Construction and Beauty Therapy, as well as those on the lowest level programmes, are more severely constrained by aspects of gender and social class positioning and are thus likely to have more limited potential for agency and fewer opportunities than their peers on more 'academic' and advanced level programmes.

### **Parity of Esteem and the Value of Vocational Education**

All the young participants were enthusiastic about their programmes and eloquent about the opportunities or capital they perceived the programmes would generate. In some cases, such as Ali and others on his L3 business programme, the vocational programme had already generated capital in terms of University offers. Many, like Oliver, acknowledged that societal perceptions of vocational education meant that a lower value was placed on vocational programmes in comparison to academic programmes. Oliver illustrated this in his comment that *'it means a bit more, A levels mean more, people take more notice of it'*. Similarly, Freddy (age 17, BTEC National L3 in Manufacturing and Engineering) acknowledged negative societal perceptions of vocational education. Freddy was unusual amongst his peers as other members of his family, including a twin brother, had taken an academic educational route. Freddy reported that *'No-one in the family's ever taken a different route to A level'*. He had opted for a BTEC after applying for, and failing to get, an elite apprenticeship with a multinational engineering company. He had reapplied at the end of his first year and been rejected again. However, Freddy had just been accepted to do Mechanical Engineering at Loughborough University. The University required him to do a Foundation year before beginning the degree programme. Despite the requirement that he should do a foundation year, which he did not question, Freddy valued the practical skills he had learned on his course, comparing himself with his twin brother: *'My brother thinks I'm thick, taking the easy route, but he never declines my help'* and *'[My twin has] done three A levels; PE, Business and Resistant Materials. His project [for Resistant Materials], all the practical side of it, all the engineering of things inside his project, I did it all. He doesn't have that skill, and college gives you a wide*

*range of skills*'. His perception that 'additional' and useful skills are conferred by vocational education seemed inconsistent with the HEI requirement for an extended transition into a degree in the same subject area. Similarly dissonant was his acknowledgement that his vocational programme was held in generally lower esteem than his twin's A level programme. His use of the word 'thick' in association with his position as a vocational student was echoed by other participants, such as Chloe, an Art student who considered that '*people feel we are doing these courses because we're thick*'. The acknowledgement that vocational qualifications had lower societal esteem was consistent across all participants, irrespective of age, institution or level of education. Whilst this was in tension with their enthusiasm for their courses, and with the oft stated belief that a vocational qualification would confer unspecified advantages in the labour market, it was reflective of a consistent policy failure to address issues of esteem for vocational education in England.

Governments of all political persuasions have sought to address these issues since the tension between the vocational and academic curriculum and their relationship to class was noted by the 1868 Taunton Commission. This process was accelerated at the time of the new vocationalism in the late 1970s since when policy makers have put vocational education and training through a process of unceasing change, with initiatives ranging from TVEI to CPVE and GNVQ as well as more recent failed initiatives such as vocational GCSEs. However, as recently as 2005, New Labour was still seeking to address the problem of 'vocational education and training for young people [having] low credibility and status in [England and Wales]' (DfES 2005:17). The failure of these initiatives echoes through the perception of vocational students that they are less able than their middle class peers on GCSE and A level programmes. It is a failure which has been acknowledged by the Coalition, in common with earlier governments, yet despite the commissioning of, and response to, the Wolf Report (2011) government commitments to raise the status of vocational education and training (DBIS, 2012:6) retain hollow echoes of the failures of their predecessors.

## **Discussion**

These failures are particularly pertinent to those young people on the lowest level vocational programmes who experience the most significant educational inequalities and disadvantages and who have been most significantly 'othered' in education policy relating to both vocational education and post-14 education. In terms of these young people, key issues in Coalition education policy are, firstly, that it continues to homogenise low

attaining young people in the context of a deficit model associated with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Secondly, it assumes linear progression through education to the labour market, failing to take cognisance of mass youth unemployment and, in particular, its implications for the most marginalised. These are stark and simple: where there is an extent of mass youth unemployment which is leading graduates to apply for low pay, low skill work, the employment opportunities for the least qualified are diminished. In addition to the implications for identity formation and the transition to adulthood, which are effectively put on hold, a dependence on benefits adds another dimension to the deficit model in which these young people are already perceived by policy makers and wider society.

Although the coalition policy commitment to providing ‘good progression opportunities to Level 3’ (2011:5) represents a response to an earlier New Labour acknowledgement that not all vocational qualifications offered progression routes to higher levels (DfES 2005:19) it still assumes that all young people, including the least able and the most disaffected, are willing and able to progress, at least to the level 3 benchmark. This assumption has been evident in policy over a number of years (e.g. see also DfES 2005; 2006; 2007; DCFS 2008) suggesting that Coalition policy continues to make ‘assumptions [which] might be leading to half-right policy based on incomplete understandings or surface views of learner needs that are more politically constructed than real’ (Hodgson et al, 2007:315).

As in earlier, New Labour policy, these taken-for-granted about progression also assume equal potential in all young people in all areas of their life, thus creating a dissonance with philosophies of diversity and with the sociological argument that educational achievement is related to social class reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:154; Tomlinson, 2001). In making such assumptions, coalition policy continues to deny any intrinsic value in education for its own sake at lower levels and in the value of increased self confidence, or other non- pecuniary benefits which might arise from undertaking such a programme (Preston and Hammond, 2003).

The Coalition commissioning of the Wolf Review, and the commitment to accept in full its recommendations, represent a positive move in many respects. Specific actions will not, of themselves however, improve the quality or esteem of vocational education. Whilst the commitment to increase numbers of apprenticeships (DfE 2011:3) is to be welcomed, these have the potential to be of good or poor quality: in terms of increasing esteem for them, this is more likely to be an unintended consequence of the introduction of higher

fees for HE and shifts in the social class demographic of young people taking up apprenticeships. Similarly, flagship UTCs may raise societal value of apprenticeships and some elite forms of vocational education, and again, this is to be welcomed.

However, elite forms of vocational education, including apprenticeships, are at higher levels, and although both Wolf (2011:113), and the Government response (2011:7) acknowledge the different needs of low-attaining young people policy developments continue to build on the assumption that progression to level 3 and beyond is a possibility for all young people. The Government response committed to publishing a Green Paper on SEN to address needs of lowest attainers (DfE, 2011:8). However, the proposal in the Green Paper to 'build on the findings of the Wolf Review of vocational education to improve vocational and work-related learning options for young people aged 14 to 25 with SEN or who are disabled' (DfE, 2011b:84) is woolly, at best and does not clearly commit to transforming education for low-attaining young people consistent with the recommendation from Wolf to concentrate on 'core academic skills of English and maths, and on work experience' and to amend funding and performance measures to 'promote a focus on these core areas and on employment outcomes rather than on the accrual of qualifications' (Wolf, 2011:14).

Two critical factors give further concern here. Firstly, those young people whose positioning is ambivalent, very low attaining but without a formal diagnosis of special educational need are effectively absent from both documents. These young people are almost invariably from working class homes, often disaffected with education and lacking effective social support mechanisms to promote a transition from school to work. Despite this, policy makers assume that 'low-attaining' is something which happens in isolation, and that young people have families with economic and educational resources to support their transition from school to work, an assumption which fails to take cognisance of the reality for many of these young people. Amongst the lowest attaining young people in this study, in common with those in earlier work, families had limited material resources, and in view of the educational backgrounds of the young people seemed likely also to have limited educational knowledge or resources. This implies that these families do not have the cultural capital to generate academic profits for their children, and social class reproduction becomes more likely as educational experience and achievement is 'inherited' in the form of cultural capital placing these young people at a significant disadvantage in terms of educational inheritance (Ball et al, 1999).

Secondly, the suggestion that vocational options will be available for young people with SEN does not acknowledge the obvious: that a majority of these young people are unlikely to be able to compete for elite apprenticeships and places at UTCs. The concomitant result of that is that these young people, already amongst the most marginalised, are likely to be subject to greater forms of inequality as they are consigned to low level forms of vocational education and training which continue to be held in low societal esteem and which are likely to command minimal exchange value in the labour market and confer minimal educational advantage. Despite this, it is an underlying assumption of policy makers that all young people on a particular route, irrespective of whether it is academic or vocational, will be willing and able to progress.

Education Policy also fails to acknowledge the impact of the collapse of the youth labour market and the significant structural problems in terms of youth employment. In the context of a labour market where graduates are competing for low pay, low skill work, the 'opportunities' for the most marginalised have diminished to the point of non-existence.

## Conclusions

Despite these challenges, this study demonstrates that young people themselves see a value in a practical vocational education and, possibly showing awareness of youth unemployment, are optimistic that it will confer the advantages policy makers promise in the labour market. Significantly, however, they also acknowledge the academic/ vocational divide and are realistic about broader societal perceptions of vocational education. They are optimistic about their futures, but, particularly at lower levels, have unrealistic aspirations in terms of the potential educational and labour exchange value of their vocational qualifications and tend to have messier and more broken trajectories. However, even where young people at higher levels had apparently linear career trajectories, data suggested that rather than being the rational 'ladder-like' trajectories (Hodkinson, 1996: 132/ 133) implied by government rhetoric, the transitions and programme choices of most young people were heavily influenced by contingent events and significant others, reflecting a situation where young people are constrained and enabled by external opportunities and personal subjective perceptions as they make 'pragmatically rational career choices' (Hodkinson *et al* 1996:3).

These findings reflect the fact that those young people, such as Freddy, from supportive homes with access to cultural capital and greater potential for agency, face an uncertain future in which they will make 'pragmatically rational choices' as their situation evolves. That these uncertainties are much greater for those young people with much poorer

educational outcomes, from lower social classes and with less access to cultural capital is a fact that Coalition policy continues to ignore. Thus, despite their optimism and commitment to their vocational programmes, and despite the promises of policy rhetoric, these young people are unequally positioned within an education system which exists as a structure for the reproduction of class and which, by unequally preparing them for particular forms of low status work in an unequal jobs market in which those from more elite social classes will have access to the best jobs (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:184) is also complicit in labour (re)production.

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